RECORD COPY
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

IN

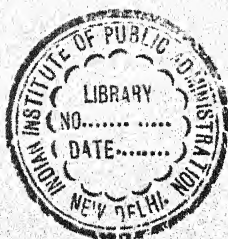## INDIA

DR. V. JAGANNADHAM
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

INDRAPRASTHA ESTATE, RING ROAD
NEW DELHI·1

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN INDIA

BY

V. JAGANNADHAM

Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Public Administration

*

I. General observations

The title of the essay is as ambitious as it is vague. Each of the three terms, 'social', 'cultural', 'adaptation', is a loose undefinable word by which no two writers or readers mean the same thing. To illustrate the above statement, 'social' may refer to the web of relationships in the Great Society or the small community or formal and informal or structural and functional aspects of life in society. Similarly, "cultural" may refer to the whole or part, of the 'learned' ways of living or behaviour, to the values, standards, techniques, statuses and systems of beliefs, conduct, production, possessions, and powers etc. respectively. In the same way adaptation is a biological concept which means "the process of modifying so as to suit new conditions." Its verbal form "adapt" means "to fit, to make suitable, to alter so as to fit for new use, to adjust." Unless we define the what, why, and how of the verb 'adapt' and also state clearly the ultimate goal and form of what we derive by altering, we are likely to add to the confusion in the subject.

Limitations of the biological analogy

When this biological concept is applied to social-cultural spheres, we must remember the limitations of analogy. These limitations disguise and distort the meaning and understanding of the processes and forces that operate in the lives of individuals and groups who constitute the base and media of society and culture. Moreover, the curtains that separate the cultures, the complexes that divide the classes within the same society or culture, the towers that separate the western-educated "intellectuals" from other educated or uneducated "manuals", the smokescreens that keep apart the scientist from the humanist, the secular from the sacred, the administrator from the academician — all these and other intangible divisions make it difficult to convey in meaningful language what we mean by social-cultural adaptation. Nevertheless the effort to unravel these differences and difficulties is a worthwhile exercise.

Change, development and adaptation

The foregoing warning encourages one to embark upon a discussion of the subtle differences between change, development, and adaptation. It is a common platitude to say that change is the law of life. One hardly

1
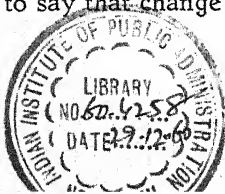
wonders whether this statement is true, when one begins to observe and reflect upon the "unchanging east" and the "changing west". Even nature appears to be an unchanging repetition of cycles of day and night, summer and winter, and so on. If one reflects upon the stream of life and environment one is struck by the philosophical dualism of change and non-change of the individual and the absolute. If we leave aside the metaphysical aspects of change and non-change, we may safely conclude that change has been taking place in and around man since the genesis of human society. This continuous process of change and adaptation are evident in the march of society from a simple undifferentiated primitive tribe to the modern complex community based on an elaborate division of labour and specialization. Phillips Roupp draws a distinction between change and development and says that "social developments, as distinct from social change, is the purposive alteration of conditions". He further observes that "development signifies change from something thought to be less desirable to something thought to be more desirable".

Development denotes a continuous pattern of action for change, while adaptation [1]) signifies an organic growth or an integrated assimilation of the old with the new and vice versa, without any break of breach between the two, while Development (as in Community Development movement) is education-for-action to reach pre-determined targets; adaptation is induction or socialization of the individual into the new synthetic value system, behavioural pattern and institutional environment. Without further elaboration it may be said that change, development and adaptation are consequential steps and inter-acting processes in man's relations with fellow-men, matter and spirit.

Changing modern society

The study of social-cultural adaptation becomes more meaningful if one views it from the perspective of social change in modern society. The following description of Martin H. Neumeyer is appropriate in this context: "Social life is an ongoing affair, rooted in the past, oriented to the present but a little uncertain about the future". About social change in modern society he observes: "Modern society is dynamic, constantly changing. It is passing through a period of transition with far-reaching social and cultural changes on every hand which have unsettled old foundations, especially established structures and controls, groups, institutions,

---

[1]) A community develops as it advances in scale, efficiency, freedom and mutuality of service. By scale is meant number of population, by efficiency the adequate apportionment and coordination of functions in the service of an end, whatever the end may be and whether it be or be not understood by those who contribute to it. By freedom is meant scope for thought, character, initiative on the part of the members of the community. By mutuality is meant service of an end in which each who serves participates. Communities differ greatly in all these respects". (L. T. Hobhouse: Social Development).

standards of behaviour and ways of doing things have given way to deviations and uncertainties. Traditional values are questioned and sometimes ignored. Social conditions are in a state of flux." [1]

Types of social change

The study of social-cultural adaptation will be helped by a reference to the phenomena of change, types of change and sources of change. The subject of social change with special reference to underdeveloped countries is studied by a number of writers. A recent publication [2], "Community structure and change" briefly describes the essence of the aspects referred to above. After referring to the difficulties in understanding change and the nature of sociale change, the authors describe 1) the long-term trend arising out of the increasing levels of standard of living, 2) the permanent transfer of a function from one social unit to another, for example, the production functions from the family to economic institutions, 3) the shift in a fundamental aspect of one or more of the dimensions of the community. By fundamental is meant those aspects which are least amenable to fluctuation such as mores and folkways. Thus the time element, the length of time over which the change persists, is the factor which distinguishes change from fluctuation. The criteria for judging the short-term fluctuation from long-term change is difficult to discover but a clue to this may be found in the changes in the structure of the society.

The phenomena of change may be analysed under four heads:

1. Change at the total community level: This change occurs slowly and over a period of generations. A change from a sacred-folk to a "culture secular" — prescribed culture illustrates this aspect.

2. Change at the pan-community level. This happens when "total local units become homogenized in the mass". This phenomenon is visible especially in the interrelations following the changes among the various area-bound or kinship-bound local committees.

3. A third level of change is change in dimensions and elements of community structure [3]. Dimensions tend to produce changes in the mores

---

[1] Martin H. Neumeyer: Social Problem and the Changing Society — p. 4.
[2] Community structure and change — Macmillan, 1960. Another interesting publication in this context is: Lippitt, Watson and Westley: The Dynamics of Planned Change, Harcourt. Brace & Co., N.Y., 1958.
[3] As a unit for analysis a community is a discrete social structure. A community is a structure of a) elements and b) dimensions.
a) Elements are the relationships among institutions, groups, formal organisations or other component units within the community.
b) Dimensions are the variable influences of these elements extending through the breadth and depth of a community. Authoritarian or democratic, tradition or rational bound, static or mobile etc. — these all-pervasive patterns are referred to as dimensions.

of the remainder of the community rather than would elements. Both of them change within themselves and cause other social changes. Example: the value system may change from being homogeneous to being heterogeneous or from use of unwritten codes to written ones.

4. The fourth level of change is change in the components such as the family, school, religious, or political unit etc. These changes in the components or substructures become significant when their functions change. Example: working mother.

The characteristics of change and adaptation in modern society are:

1. from sacred to secular society
2. from homogeneity to heterogeneity in society
3. from folklore to science as the basis of life in society
4. from primary to secondary community.

Anticipation of processes and consequences of change

Social-cultural adaptation is a deliberate attempt at change. It is a consciously guided change and therefore requires careful anticipation of consequences as well as a complex programme of operations involving an original design, training of leaders and personnel, steps in implementation, periodical evaluation and modification of programmes etc. The anticipation of consequences raises the following questions: "Is it quantitative or qualitative change? If it is quantitative, is the programme merely speeding up a trend trying to get one started? If it is qualitative then one may ask, is the community structured so that a new dimension, a new element can be added successfully? If so, will it help people achieve their goals or merely create a new social and cultural diversity to confuse people? What form of social change is being introduced — a linear trend which will gain momentum in the same direction, or a cyclical trend which will return to former situations after it has run its gamut? If it is linear, is there a point where there may be too much of a good thing? If so, how do you stop the trend?" There may be many more questions.

Factors which are involved in understanding or anticipating the consequences of change are 1) the value system 2) the structure and functions of institutions 3) the state of readiness of the people and the community to change 4) the kind of incentives to change.

In planning for social-cultural adaptation, the various sources of change have to be mobilized, namely, 1) physical and economic environment of the community 2) increased communication facilities between one community and another 3) personal example 4) exhortation 5) statutory laws and regulations, modifications of organisation at national, state and local levels in governmental and non-governmental organisations 6) changes

in traditional institutions like family, church 7) science and technology as propellers of change.

It will be noticed from the above seven sources of change that social-cultural adaptation cannot be studied in isolation, that adaptation cannot be brought about in one sphere without affecting or being affected by corresponding changes or the absence of changes in other spheres, that social-cultural adaptation is a slow organic growth whose effects can be felt over generations but cannot be measured over budget years. The trends and implications of change, however, are worth studying.

II.   The adaptation process

The process of social-cultural adaptation is set in motion by the ideological-technological revolutions that have been taking place over a long period. The phenomena of adaptation are a biological analogy applied to social change. It has been going on since the origin of the physical universe and human society. What, however, distinguishes modern social-cultural adaptation is the pace and the scale. Till the onset of the recent scientific and technological revolutions, social-cultural changes had been slow and gradual, local and limited. Now, of course, the growth of industrial societies demand the rapid adaptation of traditional institutions and milieux to the environment moulded by liberal ideology and power technology.

The advanced countries have groped in darkness in the earlier stages of development and their institutions have grown with technological changes through trial and error, through conflict and competition, through philosophy and law which have been considered appropriate since the days of the Renaissance and Reformation, i.e. from the 15th century onwards. The social-cultural adaptation in those countries has taken the settled form of "administrative liberalism of the welfare state."

The process of adaptation in the materially advanced countries also is not complete because the welfare state in its turn is throwing up acute problems of personal and group maladjustments such as urbanization with a high delinquency rate, drink and drug addictions, suicides and divorces, mental ill-health and neurosis. Social scientists and practical statesmen in these countries are endeavouring to diagnose and adapt the social-cultural institutions and milieux to the new environment generated by liberal ideology and power technology. The search for a new harmony between man and environment and man and man through a continuous process of adaptation is, therefore, an ongoing, universal phenomenon.

The Objective of adaptation: "Selective Assimilation"

In industrially backward countries, however, the process of social-culture adaptation is characterized by the phenomenon of importing the material

5

equipment, and social-cultural institutions and attempting to graft them upon the existing framework. Most of these countries have old, traditional cultures with newly-won independent state-hood. The reaction to the culture of imperial rulers, who were mostly from industrially advanced countries, was two-fold during the freedom struggle:

1. love of indigenous customs and culture and
2. admiration for the material prosperity and institutions of the ruling countries.

This is manifest in their attempts both before and after independence to preserve the best in the indigenous cultures and adapt the best in the ruler's culture. This is indicated by the phrase "selective assimilation" of both the cultures — the old indigenous and the new imported cultures.

This process of "selective assimilations" places heavy responsibilities and considerable limitations upon those who are charged with the task of social-cultural adaptation. It is their responsibility to ascertain precisely the best in the old and the new cultures and state clearly the things to be adapted and the process of adaptation. The limitation, however, consists in the task of selecting the best from each integrated comprehensive mould of social-cultural set-up and producing a new synthetic product from out of the crucible. This involves considerable effort. A consequence of this effort is the co-existence side by side of the traditional and transformed cultures symbolised by the bullock cart and the automobile on the same road.

"The slow-moving society, trapped for centuries in a cycle of poverty, tradition, ignorance and disease", is compelled to adapt itself to a fast-marching society engaged in a planned development towards a healthy, educated, citizenry of a welfare state."

The Tasks of Adaptation

Socio-cultural adaptation is organic rather than mechanical in its process. It is immature to think that a graft of ideological-technological structure upon the existing frame-work will bring the necessary changes. Adaptation is a gradual process of changes in all aspects of social life to fit the environment. It is indeed recognized that such adaptation cannot be achieved by imported ideas, institutions or equipment. These latter would, in their turn, need an appropriate outlook, values and habits to nourish and improve on them. A new ethic to sustain them will be needed. We may recall that in Europe the protestant ethic preceded the development of capitalism. A change from traditional to a new social order demands from its leaders and rank and file, i.e. agents and clients of change, a willingness to change, a readiness to shoulder new responsibilities and an awareness of new challenges. These are prerequisites for social-cultural adaptation. They are intangible elements and it is hoped that by creating appropriate

institutions and organisations we shall see laid the basis for the emergence of these intangible characteristics such as spirit, ethic, willingness, readiness, awareness etc.

It is for this reason that the constitutions of the new states lay emphasis upon politico-economic institutional framework. These are also easy to adopt and adapt as they place no serious strain upon the material resources of the country.

This may be illustrated from the new constitutions adopted or in process of adoption by the new states in the old societies. The constitution of the Republic of India is a classic example of the liberal democratic state. The preamble, the chapters on the fundamental rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy are a conspicuous illustration of the impact of ex-rulers' ideologies and institutions on the minds of the present rulers and their readiness to adopt them. The parliamentary form of government, social legislation and administrative reforms are further illustrations. All these testify to the provision of structural and institutional frame-work to support and nourish the intangible characteristics. On the economic side too, the method of planning, the establishment of heavy industries, the mechanization of transport and agriculture, and some areas of production of consumer goods also indicate the endeavour to provide the material base for the spiritual values of the new social order.

In this task, the collaboration of international agencies and multi-national agencies such as the Colombo Plan countries are helping to accelerate the pace of development of the underdeveloped countries and social adaptation.

Simultaneous socio-economic development

A noteworthy feature of the current process of social-cultural adaptation is the reduction of such stresses and strains of growth as characterised the early stages of growth in the industrially advanced countries. This is sought to be done by emphasizing balanced or harmonious development in the economic and social spheres. Such a harmonious development would provide a material base for social development and social services for economic development. The community development programmes are a clear indication of the two-pronged approach. Its emphasis is as much on development as on community because a divorce between the two is considered to be the main cause of serious maladjustments and conflicts within and without the national frontiers among industrially advanced countries.

Resistance to adaptation

There is a clear perception of the objectives to be achieved and an awareness of the tasks to be undertaken, as is seen in the Indian First Five

Year Plan. But the social-cultural resistance of an old society to new ways is not equally clearly perceived. The process of social change is vitiated by the unpreparedness to meet the resistance to adaptation. This unpreparedness is neither deliberate nor conscious. It is believed and hoped by the planners that the method and content of their plan of development will be received by the people, as intelligent, rational citizens, for it answers a felt need. This hope and belief proves to be not quite well founded. While the necessary administrative organisation is built for implementing the plan, the Planners have not emotionally orientated the people to the linkages and processes demanded by it. Attitudes towards work, wealth and welfare are still those of the subsistence economy (static status-relations, stagnant outlook on life). The absence of emotional investment in the programme is a product of multi-causal phenomena such as ignorance, indifference and inertia. Other hurdles are deep rooted customs and traditions, lack of incentives and motivation, opposition from vested-interests who have a stake in the status quo, genuine fear of change as destructive of the cherished cultural heritage and so on. All these resistances are part of any phenomena of social change but their seriousness is accentuated by the quickness of tempo demanded by telescoping centuries of growth into a few decades of democratically-planned development. Such telescoping is not impossible but it is a function of leadership in all walks of life namely political, economic, professional, administrative and intellectual. Reference may be made here to one fact, namely the gulf between leaders and the mass of the people. Such a gulf prevails in all countries but the gulf is wide and qualitatively different in the underdeveloped countries. This gulf also acts as a barrier to social-cultural adaptation. The leaders may be conscious and aware of the value and benefits of the methods and contents of the planned programme. But this consciousness does not lend itself to easy communication to the rank and file of the people because of the differences in experience, back-ground and training, social status, and opportunities for contacts between the leaders and the people. This gulf is evident not merely between leaders and followers, but also in policy and administration at all levels. Any student of the process of social-cultural adaptation is struck as much by the gulf between aspiration and achievements, as by the assistance to adaptation, noted earlier. While the stated goals are admirable the progress towards their realisation is painfully slow. The lag between plan and performance tends to produce a certain scepticism and a sense of frustration which in their turn act as resistance to adaptation.

Responses to Adaptation

The foregoing account may create the impression that the process of social-cultural adaptation meets with formidable resistance and very little response. It is necessary to hasten to correct such an impression. The forms

of resistance to adaptation are described prior to the responses in order to emphasize the uphill nature of the process of adaptation and to place the responses in their proper perspective.

It is difficult to assess and appraise the responses in the field of social-cultural adaptation because they do not easily lend themselves to measurement in concrete units. Another difficulty is the absence of a uniform or universally accepted hypothesis of values in evaluation. The same data may be utilized for supporting opposite conclusions. These differences in conclusions arise out of differences in angles of vision and degrees of emphasis upon responses. Bearing these limitations in mind, we may formulate some tentative conclusions about responses to the process of socio-cultural adaptation.

These responses may be studied under two heads, namely responses to material and responses to non-material aspects of adaptation. Responses to material development may be classified under 1) industry 2) agriculture 3) irrigation 4) power 5) transport and communications 6) medicine and sanitation 7) housing and town planning, etc. In view of the fact that other sections of the IULA conference are dealing with some at least of these aspects, it is not proposed to deal with them elaborately here. It is enough to say that in respect of all concrete programmes of immediate profit or advantage responses are readily forthcoming from the bulk of the people. Lukewarmness and indifference to concrete programmes are rare; the implementation of these programmes is delayed by inadequate supplies, delays in services, red-tape in administration etc., and not so much by the lack of appreciation or willingness on the part of the people to make use of them. Ignorance, inertia and indigence may explain initial reluctance to make use of them but the demonstration technique or the example of the use by the better educated and more well-to-do neighbours breaks the ice of resistance attributable to love of traditional customs and values.

The non-material aspects of development such as outlook on life, values in society and traditions in group-living, however, meet with a much cooler reception. This is understandable because the mind like the body grows by nourishment and exercise. The non-material traditions reflect the group-mind nourished by generations of heritage and it is childish to expect, in our anxiety for development, to change them over a period of a few years. This is especially true in such matters as the philosophical foundations of the doctrine of Karma and Dharma, of transmigration of the soul, of faith in God or reincarnation. This is also true in such relationships as those between superior and subordinate, husband and wife, parent and children, teacher and student. This is, to some extent, true of attachment to the traditional rituals and ceremonies of marriage and funerals, dress and food, language and culture, fine arts and tastes and so on. In view of the fact that these are social or psychological phenomena, it is difficult to assess them, because there may be outward conformity to form without

9

a cultivation of its spirit. These forms may be embodied in structures, rules, procedures and manuals but they may not be followed in practice. Notwithstanding the use of survey techniques, generalisations about these matters tend to suffer from impressionistic evaluations. A noteworthy feature of the current social adaptation is the attempt at mutual understanding of different cultures. A tendency to compare the traditional with the modern and describe the former as primitive and the latter as progressive is fast giving way to an understanding of the meaning and significance of the former also. This change is largely a product of the efforts of anthropologists and sociologists, of UNESCO and other U.N. agencies who emphasize the organic nature of cultural life and the individuality and interrelation of cultures. Even in these non-material aspects, such forces as education, travel, and mass media of communication are bringing about an understanding if not adaptation of each other in, and between the backward and advanced countries. This understanding, however, is at present confined only to a small minority but it is sure to spread faster with development in economic and educational spheres. Provided that wars do not generate suspicion and fear between countries, conditions seem favourable for the growth of a basic, standard set of values, outlook and behaviour all over the world. This is evident in most urban areas of the world. This is also evident in the suburban areas which imitate the urban areas. The distinction between urban and rural areas is more pronounced. This is the case all over the world. The rural areas, where agricultural population predominate, share more or less common characteristics all over the world.

In conclusion, the responses to social-cultural adaptation may be summarized as follows:

1. The response to concrete programmes of immediate (as against remote) material benefit is readily forthcoming.

2. The response to programmes involving inculcation of abstract values is not so readily forthcoming. Even here, there is a difference in the degree of response between urban and rural areas. Urban areas take to adaptation more easily than rural areas. This difference is a universal characteristic, and need not be a source of discouragement.

3. There is need for a two-pronged attack upon resistance to adaptation, namely 1) on the ideological front and 2) upon the environmental front because both are interacting. The attack upon the first needs greater as well as subtler effort because of the complex nature of the process of adaptation in this field.

Evidences of adaptation

The task of selecting evidence of adaptation is affected by subjective factors. Firstly it is dependent on one's temperament and attitudes. What

is considered to be an adaptation, implying movement towards the better, by a middle-aged person, for example, might be regarded as a degenerate step by the older generation or too much of a palliative by the younger generation. Further, though change and adaptation do not appear on the surface and in a pronounced way, there is a great deal of "shifting". The following description by Sinclair Lewis in "Main Street", (p. 283) may help us to understand the process.

"Though the town seemed to Carol to change no more than the surrounding fields, there was a constant shifting these three years. The citizens of the prairie drift always westward ...... The town remains unvaried, yet the individual faces alter like classes in college ...... There is, except among professional men and the wealthy, no constancy of residence or occupation. A man becomes a farmer, grocer, town policeman, garageman, restaurant owner, postmaster, insurance agent, farmer all over again and the community more or less patiently suffers from his lack of knowledge in each of his experiments."

The excuse for the above long quotation is that it expresses the essence of adaptation. It does not attract attention but it is going on. It requires careful observation to group the trends of change and adaptation. Reference here will be made to a few examples of adaptation. The career and personality of leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru are themselves evidence of adaptation and examples for millions to shape their lives, however imperfectly, on those models. The constitutional and social reform legislation like the removal of caste disabilities and other civic disabilities, the law of civil marriage and submission rights for women removing their shackles of bondage and submission according to law, all these offer examples of how the liberal ideology of freedom and equality have, by legislature, caused the adaptation of the traditional social institutions. While the enjoyment of freedom, in reality, is a matter of education and opportunity, the fact of release from customary or legal claims is indeed a great source of inspiration and help. The migration to urban areas, the freedom to pursue an occupation according to acquired rather than hereditary skills, the demand for more and more education and medical facilities, the love of finer clothes, goods and recreation — all these are evidence of an awakening and a restlessness which, if diverted by proper leadership into channels of constructive endeavour, are bound to result in a satisfactory process of adaptation. The series of Plans directing the change is a great change in itself. The evidence of changes in the industrial and economic field need not be enumerated because they are the subject matter of other sections. The impulse of change, however generated, has created ripples, if not tides in the placid waters of traditional life. This may be witnessed in the decline of the dominance of the joint or extended family and the growing popularity of the single or

11

two-generation family. This change is significant because it is a shift in the unit of society — from family to individual, and in the philosophy of membership in the family, so that the personality of the individual members is now allowed to develop instead of being suppressed. The ways and means for promoting this goal have come into a new focus and a new perspective. Marriages at an advanced age under civil law among persons belonging to different sects or castes are no longer frowned upon nor are they followed by excommunication. The national educational system with a longing for higher education at home and in foreign countries is a great cataclysm of change and adaptation. Those who have had an English education, as well as the personnel in the foreign embassies and U.N. agencies, technical assistance agencies, etc., act as purveyors of new values, attitudes and behaviour patterns in metropolitan and non-metropolitan urban areas. Loyalty to an ever widening territorial community up to the nation-state level is gaining in evidence daily and the democratic mechanism helps to quicken this growth. Mutual aid among units larger than a kinship community and a network of statutory and voluntary welfare organisations which are engaged in encouraging self-reliance in relief and betterment work are fast developing in urban and rural areas. A new spirit of enterprise, adventure, competition and experimentation in all walks and styles of life is impelling the younger generation in urban areas to take to exciting activities which sometimes manifest themselves in the form of delinquency, traffic in vice, etc., but these are the other side of the coin of dynamic urban industrial developments. The forces of liberation and release are also expressing themselves in the form of new trends in art, literature, theatre, music and the other fine arts. In these fields of fine arts, the tendency is not only to revive the classical or merely imitate the imported, but integrate and assimilate or re-create the "classical" in the light of the "modern". This tendency can be observed in the periodic exhibitions of art, in the enormous popularity of the short story, social and crime fiction, in the indigenous opera and ballet plays, in the solo and orchestral music, both light and serious on the radio, in the cinema etc.

The above description of evidence of change may lead one to believe that all is well with social and cultural adaptation in India. However, attention may be drawn to the fact that this adaptation is evident more in urban than in rural areas, more on the surface, in form and in structure than in the deeper core of the hearts and minds of the people at large. About the first part of the statement, there cannot be much dispute. Here again one may modify the statement by pointing to the great awakening in rural areas thanks to the massive community development activities, gigantic irrigation and power projects, health and sanitation drives, educational and recreational facilities, welfare extension projects, children's days, election campaigns and similar efforts.

The contention that this evidence reflects adaptation in form, on the surface, may appear to be a cynical subjective estimate of the process of adaptation. It is probably a valid charge. By this aspect, however, it is meant to suggest that the process is generated by a large scale effort and enthusiasm in the initial stages and that it has not taken deep roots. Adaptation so far is confined to a few areas of the country and in limited walks of life. The illiterate masses in urban and rural areas, the tradition-bound womenfolk and the semi-educated lower middle classes may reflect the symbols of spectacular rather than the strength of substantive change in outlook and ways of life. Adaptation so far is also like a pilot project, and a pioneering experiment. It is going on well but if the pilot project is to become the established pattern for every individual in the country as a whole, in other words, if the inspired moments of realisation are to become the routinized activities both in daily life behaviour, in outlook and in attitudes, if society is to be moulded by new concepts of work, wealth and welfare, the application on a mass-scale of the pilot project demands Herculean efforts and constant vigilance in implementation. In this respect, state and voluntary effort, especially in the local field have a great responsibility to fulfil and a great rôle to play.

Processes of adaptation

Reference has already been made to the organic nature of the process of adaptation. This has two implications. 1) That adaptation in one sphere is likely to affect other spheres. This is particularly true of economic development and culture change. 2) That adaptation is a slow and gradual process. Even if the pace of change is forced and its consequences are far-reaching, the mass of the people take a long time to understand or realise intelligently its full ramifications.

The process of social-cultural adaptation in India is acknowledgedly democratic while in other countries it is qualifiedly democratic, i.e. it is either guided, or directed, or basic democracy. By the democratic process we mean that elected representative institutions are used as channels of expression; that persuasion rather than coercion is used to bring about desired changes.

Having stated the organic and democratic features of the process of adaptation, we may briefly enumerate a few characteristics of this process. The initiative and impulse for the process of adaptation comes from the top leadership and higher levels of government who have been influenced by a liberal education, trained in political institutions and inspired by the economic development of the industrially advanced countries. The rank and file of the people are only vicariously and remotely influenced by the above forces. Hence the process of adaptation is affected by the gulf between the leaders and the people. This gulf is widened in India by the split in ideology between capitalistic and sarvodaya approaches to eco-

nomic development. This split is also manifest in the administrative processes of adaptation, namely centralized versus decentralized administration. The absence of a literate, intelligent, informed electorate or public opinion renders the base of democracy weak and incapable of sustaining the top heavy administration.

Product of adaptation

The final product of social-cultural adaptation has yet to take shape. The full implications of adaptation take a long time to manifest themselves. In the meantime further developments in ideology and technology may create a lag between them and the social-cultural adaptation. In other words, a phenomenon of "permanent transition" and a constant "culture lag" is a direct product of the advances in science and technology. These advances have created fissures in an otherwise homogeneous and integrated society. The concept of "culture lag" consists in the uneven growth of different aspects of life in society. Technical skills and economic institutions develop ahead of social-cultural institutions. Such uneven development creates an atmosphere of dynamic disequilibrium and coexistence of the traditional folkways and mores by the side of the rationally organised institutions and laws. Not all persons or groups of persons are capable of understanding or adjusting to the demands arising out of the dynamic disequilibrium. Those who are not capable of adjusting themselves to the new demands become the "waste" or "victims" of growth. These are described as maladjusted persons. Where their number is large, they constitute a social problem. The phenomenon of maladjustment is described in sociological literature as "social disorganization". This is an unhappy expression which is likely to convey exaggerated notions about dynamic disequilibrium. It is, however, used to express the phenomena of those who deviate from the normal standards of organised ways and laws such as delinquents, destitutes, drink and drug addicts, divorcees, neurotics and other mentally ill persons. The "uprooting" from the compact moorings of a primary community, the impersonality and the "non-belongingness" of life in a secondary community, the 'escapes' from the boredom of lonely life in crowded urban areas, the logic of economic independence, and equality between sexes, age-groups and classes, the strain of a constant struggle for the continuous rise in standards of living — all these, which characterise modern industrial society, render inadequate the traditional concepts of contentment and harmony within oneself, among one's fellow beings and between man and nature. We have not yet developed folkways and mores appropriate for a stage of dynamic disequilibrium. We therefore find increasing tendencies towards "disorganization"; "maladjustment" and "mental ill-health". Social-cultural adaptation process seeks to prevent the intensity of maladjustments through social security and social welfare

services but it is caught in the coils of a continuous transition and constant "culture lag".

Problems of Adaptation

The foregoing description may have indicated the assets and liabilities of social-cultural adaptation. It is needless to discuss their relative proportion because both the developed and underdeveloped societies are caught in the vortex of change and adaptation as a compelling necessity. There is no question of "going back" to primitive simplicity because the choice hardly exists. It is, therefore, more appropriate to consider the problem of adaptation or how best can social scientists and active statesmen clarify the situation and bring about harmony by an adjustment of the situation to the people, and vice versa.

The situation becomes clear if we distinguish between the fundamental or enduring traits in a culture and the not so fundamental traits; the constant and variable, the universal and local, the deep rooted and the superficial traits, etc. After thus distinguishing we may study the trends and tendencies of the times and the people. For such studies as these, scholars known for their intellectual insight and ability in field surveys must be given freedom and opportunities to observe and interpret. An interesting drawback of social-cultural adaptation is a tendency to hasten its pace through legislative-administrative action. The inordinate love of the spectacular leads us to develop a "pathological system of priorities". In a recent B.B.C. broadcast talk on "The Art of the Possible" Alex Comfort observed: "Patently neurotic considerations are steering our civilization in its most important technical decisions but the selection of policies which are being enacted, of projects which are taking the lion's share of our technical power, is being determined almost wholly by the opportunity of play-therapy, of acting out, which they offer to an extremely small number of people." He continues to say that "The choices may well express public fantasies but the people are not involved in decision making; on the other hand, steps are sometimes taken to see that people do not anticipate or alter the choice made." In other words, the leaders are anxious to do good for the people rather than to live well with the people. The gulf between the leaders and masses creates the barrier between the feasible and the realisation of the feasible. The outstanding problem of social-cultural adaptation is the problem of leadership because the leaders plough the soil, furrow the line, and sow the seeds in the minds and lives of the people who constitute the harvest of harmony and happiness arising out of adaptation. But the question Alex Comfort puts is very pertinent, "How are we to control the psycho-pathology of normal people in office?"

A second problem in the process of social-cultural adaptation is the weakness of doubt created by a declining faith in the inherent superiority of unlimited material progress. This declining faith is a product of the mental

15

illnesses and maladjustments in human beings and social relationships caused by advances in material comforts and mundane pleasures. In an introduction to the studies of the "Predicaments of Modern Man" in a recent publication on "Man and Society" the following statements and questions epitomize the situation: "Yet, somehow, human progress has created new fears — of atomic destruction, of revolution and subversion. We do not know whom to trust and what to believe. Poverty in the midst of plenty and progress accompanied by insecurity; these are strange companions. How have these conditions come about? Is man responsible? What has man done or failed to do? Or are these forces over which man has no control?" [1]. These searching questions emerge out of the fundamental and far-reaching character of changes "which have unsettled the old foundations, especially the structure of society, organized groups and modes of behaviour. These changes have introduced elements of uncertainty and confusion and created a fluid and transitional atmosphere. Harry Elmer Barnes characterizes this transition as akin to the transition of the 15th century. He says, "Modern society, especially American society, is in one of the major transitional periods in human experience ...... To-day modern culture and institutions are undergoing much the same strains and stresses that medieval institutions passed through after 1500. Our institutions are already being either rapidly supplanted or readjusted to new conditions though we are as yet only in the initial stages of the vast transformation through which modern culture is bound to pass before it can stabilize itself in a new phase of cultural evolution." [1]

The declining faith in the limitless material progress, and the state of permanent transition and fluidity, have led to a search for new alternative types of socio-cultural organisation. Jayaprakash Narain, the Bhoodan leader and an ex-socialist leader, has propounded what he describes as a "communitarian society" in which, under a system of decentralized economy and administration, the individual and primary community will be restored to a greater harmony in and among themselves, between themselves and the nature around, and finally between matter and spirit. In other words, the search is for the creation of, rather than an adaptation to, a new society. Unlike in the nineteenth century when every development was believed to be a mile-stone towards a new happier society, today the process of adaptation is faced with the problem of confusion and uncertainty which sap the faith and enthusiasm in endeavours to adopt the advances in technology.

Agencies of Adaptation.

The process of social-cultural adaptation involves a deliberate change of the community's mores and practices. It involves the planning and

---

[1] Harry Elmer Barnes: "Society in Transition", Prentice Hall Inc. N.Y., 1950 PUII, page VII.

administration of change. Even though the direction of change is clear, its implementation calls for considerable experimentation and adaptation of administrative agencies to bring out the desired adaptation. In this task, the central, state and local governments as well as voluntary organizations are to be mobilized as agencies of change. This mobilization is in its turn limited by the imperfect insight into and understanding of the desired ideology and technology and inadequate resources of various kinds at various levels: Two factors which explain this difficulty in mobilizing the State and community are: 1) the narrow political base and 2) the gulf between top leaders and mass of the people. John K. King attributes these two factors to the legacy of Colonialism in South East Asia. He says: "Thus, when national leaders took over the newly independent governments of South East Asia, intent on setting up political systems resembling those of the Western democracies, they found the basic ingredients of representative government — an interested, informed and sensitive electorate — was lacking." Referring to the second factor mentioned above, the same writer observes: "But the mass of South East Asian population, not as prepared to assimilate new experiences or to adapt themselves to modern political and economic life have developed political awareness more slowly. In fact so slow has been the change that there is an ever widening gap between the national leaders and the followers which to-day adds the burden of communication between the two groups to other problems. Because differences in the terms of reference and the levels of knowledge, between the governors and the governed are so great, it has proved difficult for the national leaders of South East Asia to rally around them sufficiently resolute popular opinion adequate to support their programmes or ideas. Until a reasonably broad popular base is built, it is clear that responsible and orderly representative governments cannot easily be developed through South East Asia." [1]

The above diagnosis need not lead us to defeatist conclusions. Within the short period of a decade India has experienced a revolution in politico-administrative, and structural-functional systems. Notwithstanding illiteracy, adult franchise has created a new channel for the education and expression of views of the mass of the people. The recent experiment of democratic decentralisation would give the governments at local levels — district, block and village levels — an unprecedented rôle in developmental activities and adaptation processes. The Community Development activities and methods are considered as the appropriate measures for responding to the challenging problems and situations posed under the social and cultural adaptation process. The community development methods are largely based upon education, exhortation, demonstration,

---

[1] John K. King: "The Legacy of Colonialism in South East Asia" in "Man & Society" edited by Edly Jerome, G. Maris and Samuel L. Clark, Macmillan & Co. New York. 1960 (p. 651).

supply and service administration, exemplary inculcation of values, attitudes, relationships and behaviours. Just as the comprehensive system of a social-security programme is relied upon in an urban-industrial community as a bulwark against want and insecurity, so is the community development programme relied upon in underdeveloped countries as the pivot in a social-cultural adaptation movement. The political approach under democratic decentralisation in conjunction with the socio-economic content of the community development programme should place state and voluntary effort in their proper perspective in social-cultural adaptation. The rôle of local self-governing bodies in such a set-up is bound to be far-reaching, if not revolutionary, in the uphill task of social-cultural adaptation among millions of poor ignorant, and ill-equipped people.

III. The rôle of local authorities and their problems

The rôle of statutory and voluntary effort in social-cultural adaptation is dealt with in the foregoing paragraphs. We have seen how institutions and environment are undergoing changes far more rapidly than values and relationships in the fundamental aspects of life such as outlook, beliefs, family etc. It is also observed that the gulf between top leadership and the middle or bottom rank and file is growing wider with the result that the two seem to live in different worlds, cut off from one another. In this context, a question may be raised as to what rôle the local bodies can play in removing the barriers and quickening the pace of adaptation and reaching the goal of selective assimilation.

If there were an easy and specific answer to this question, the world would be a happier place than it is. It is not that there is no answer but the answer is a complex and general one. The answer also varies from one school of thought to another. The sarvodaya school of thougt prescribes a "Communitarian society". The social-democratic school of thought prescribes a liberal administrative welfare state with democratic decentralisation or *panchayati raj* as a form of government [1]. If we forget, for the moment, the differences between these two schools of thought about the philosophy of wants and industrialization, it is obvious that both the schools insist upon an effective and active local self government as a necessary prerequisite for social-cultural adaptation. This is appropriate because local governments are the units of activity nearest to the people. They are at the same time politically educative, administratively beneficial, economically profitable, socially cohesive and culturally enlightening. This description may appear to be an exaggeration or a romanticization of the rôle of local authorities. It need not be so. The important rôle of the primary community in the contemporary mass society is increasingly felt everywhere. In most

---

[1] It may be noted that throughout the essay no reference is made to the non-democratic attempts at change or adaptation.

underdeveloped countries, the local authorities suffered from many cramping limitations under colonial rule. These limitations still exist and therefore the real rôle of local governments is not understood. It is only when the *panchayati raj* is earnestly implemented, that the rural local bodies play the rôle described above. There are, however, two obstacles in the way, namely, a) the lure of economy and efficiency in a centralized operation of services on a large-scale from a higher level government; b) the tendency for competent leadership to be attracted to the higher levels of authority and to urban areas; rural areas are therefore left in the hands of the least competent. This is a great handicap in the early stages of development.

In the above two respects, the Central and State Governments and the political parties should impose upon themselves a self-denying ordinance. The higher level governments should supervise and assist the lower levels of governments rather than 'supersede' them because of mistakes of 'take over' their activities for reasons of economy. The political parties have a great responsibility in seeing to the successful function of local bodies. If party leaders were influenced less by the blaze of power and inspired more by the call of service, less by faction and more by cooperation, the local bodies would become the best agencies of social-cultural adaptation. A convenient myth exists that the best talents should be devoted to service at the highest level but it is often forgotten that such concentration of the best at the highest level makes the structure top-heavy. Further, the complex mechanism at the top is self-propelling and has a built-in acceleration process which helps it to grow without friction; whereas the lower level units need constant oiling and greasing, push and drive, education and exhortation, precept and example from leaders of enlightened spirit and ability. This is often pointed out but seldom acted upon. Decentralized administration needs the devotion of enlightened leaders in the initial years of experimentation for local bodies to understand and fulfil their proper rôle.

Much more that is specific and concrete can be written about the rôle of local bodies in social-cultural adaptation but it loses its relevancy outside the particular socio-cultural context. Therefore, attention is drawn only to the above two general features.

Indian and probably every other country, has a long tradition of selective assimilation. The assimilation of Greek, Scythian, Parthian, Persian, Mohammedan, Mogul, cultures in the crucible of Indian culture encourages one to entertain the hope that the assimilation of modern industrial culture will not be impossible, albeit difficult. But there is, however, a difference. The culture of industrialized societies is so novel a culture to mankind that none can predict its future shape or spirit, that it is in a constant state of flux, that sometimes it threatens to destroy itself. Therefore, adaptation to such a culture is not merely a problem for underdeveloped countries. It is a universal problem which faces mankind everywhere — in developed

as well as underdeveloped countries. It is an old problem which needs to be redefined and a task which needs to be reappraised all over the world; namely the problem of the proper relationship between man, matter and spirit.

Contributed to
International Union of Local Authorities:
Annual Conference in Tel Aviv.
Nov. 1960.